

Conclusion

The Northern Wei court's choice to adopt Han-Chinese names, language, and court procedures after a century of their own established rule in the northern reaches of the old Han empire integrated the north of China into the culture and politics of the central plains in a new way. As a result, the Northern Wei's sphere of influence extended both geographically and temporally beyond itself and throughout the various administrations and polities in later China and across East Asia. The immediate effects of the Northern Wei's prominence in the region were seen in Silla Korea, in Yamato and Nara Japan, and, later, in Tang China. According to Herman Ooms, the early courts of Japan were well aware of the power and prestige of the Northern Wei and held certain fascination for them. As a result, they adopted the Northern Wei's legal codes and Yamato archaeological sites contain Northern Wei mirrors. Furthermore, several important names and phrases were adopted from the Northern Wei and integrated into Japanese parlance. For example, Ooms argues that the Yamato pronunciation for Pingcheng, the northern capital of the Northern Wei, was in fact Heijō (Nara).¹ As for the Kingdom of Silla, Northern Wei motifs show up in the ornamentation of Silla objects;² moreover, unique glasswork bowls developed in the early Northern Wei capital of Pingcheng have been found in Silla tombs,³ while the famed wooden pagoda at Silla's August Dragon Monastery and state palladium was modeled after the empress dowager's stūpa at the Eternal Peace Monastery in Luoyang. Furthermore, the Silla court employed monastic overseers and sponsored Buddhist ceremonies for state protection in the same way that the Northern Wei did.⁴

It is an attestation to the longevity of the Northern Wei outside East Asia that the Uyghur equivalent for the word "Taghbach," to take one example, was

generally used in Uyghur-language sources to refer to China itself centuries after the demise of the Northern Wei.⁵ In this same vein, the Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta (fl. 630), who lived approximately one hundred years after the fall of the Northern Wei, records in his *Historiae* that what is now recognized as China was then called Taugust, as was the capital city and the ruling class—a name that almost certainly means Taghbach.⁶ Similarly, the founding house of the non-Han Western Xia dynasty (1038–1227) legitimated their own reign and power in much the same way as did the rulers of the Northern Wei, also taking the name of Taghbach as the name of the Tangut ruling family.⁷

The Northern Wei's importance across medieval East Asian history is too large of a topic to broach in any depth here; however, in this conclusion to the study of the life and times of Empress Dowager Ling, it does make sense to wrap things up by asking what the impact of the empress dowager's life, work, and court may have had on the larger question of women's history in East Asia. I would particularly like to conclude by tracing a trajectory of the emergence of rule by Buddhist women in East Asia that finds its earliest recorded attestation in the Northern Wei.

WHERE CAN WE SEE THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S LEGACY?

The arguments and sources presented throughout this study have told the story of how the nameless girl from the Hu clan of Anding relied on Buddhists, Buddhist institutions, and Buddhist ideas, as well as unique ideas about gender and its performance that were known to the Taghbach people who founded the Northern Wei in order to become one of the most powerful politicians of her day. This story has been cobbled together from a diverse mixture of historical sources that document a more generalized change in the lives of women in the medieval period that we can tie to the empress dowager. Sleuthing across this broad array of primary sources, I have constructed a world that I believe explains the empress dowager's rise, rule, and demise. The approach I have used to do this is one that I have termed "Buddhist feminist historiography." This approach seeks to prioritize both women in social history and Buddhist sources that document them as a method of historiographical interruption, clarification, and revision.

In proposing my theory about the emergence of Buddhist monarchy for women, which finds its earliest attested iteration in the Northern Wei and which was a social movement relying on the cultural norms of the Taghbach people alongside Buddhist ideas about women and their social roles, I am aware that much of this story has been told before. Empress Wu or Wu Zetian or Emperor Wu Zhao began her independent rule in 690 of the Common Era, precisely 175 years after Empress Dowager Ling began her regency. We know from many sources that Emperor Wu Zhao used Buddhism to legitimate her reign, but what is in all likelihood the most compelling of these sources is a commentary on the *Great Cloud Sūtra*, which was

commissioned by Emperor Wu Zhao on her accession in 690 and which identified her as the fulfillment of that sūtra's prophecy regarding the female cakravartin about which we read in chapter 4.⁸ This commentary was integral to her usurpation of the Tang and her rule over her own polity, the Zhou (690–705).⁹ Similarly, in 693, a translation of a text called the *Sūtra of Raining Jewels* (Baoyu jing) was presented to her with the addition of an apocryphal section that once again explicitly identified Emperor Wu Zhao as the fulfillment of the prophecy and positioned her as a bodhisattva.¹⁰ In this way, then, Emperor Wu Zhao was the inheritor of a Northern Wei tradition of identifying a female ruler directly with buddhas and bodhisattvas.¹¹ Furthermore, in shaping her identity as a cakravartin, she also embarked on a nation-uniting scheme of venerating relics across the land in the same way her famous Indian predecessor, Aśoka,¹² as well as Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu of the Liang, did.

Although Emperor Wu Zhao engaged in a relic campaign in the same way that Emperor Wu of the Liang did, also positioning herself as a bodhisattva in a similar manner, she did so as a woman. This is an important difference that needs to be considered within the larger questions of how and why Buddhist notions of monarchy swept across East Asia in the medieval period. I believe that we can only explain this difference by putting Emperor Wu Zhao's story directly into a trajectory of social change in the lives of women that we see so clearly documented in the Northern Wei sources I have referred to in this study. Emperor Wu Zhao is the most commented on woman in Chinese history. We have no shortage of studies that document and describe the ways in which she connected her rule to Buddhism that resonate with other rulers—normally thought of as Emperor Wu of the Liang and Emperor Wen of the Sui—before and after her. In her story, what is less recognized is that she explicitly connected her rule to the Northern Wei. Emperor Wu Zhao had strong connections with the Northern Wei. Her ancestors in her father's line held official positions in the courts of both the Northern Wei and the Northern Qi. Her great-great-great-grandfather was a certain Wu Keji who was a high-ranking official under the Northern Wei; she herself posthumously bestowed on him the title of the Duke of Lu (Luguo gong). His son Wu Juchang was a general under the Northern Qi, and Empress Wu bestowed on him the rank of Great Officer (*taiwei*).¹³ As to the Emperor's connections to Northern Wei women, we have already seen how she adopted the "Two Sage" model of corulership that developed in the Northern Wei and how this model of rulership contributed to a rise in imagery of the Two-Buddha scene from the *Lotus Sūtra* during both of their reigns. We have also seen how Empress Dowager Ling, too, may have been known through this type of paradigm, in her case evoked in the name of the monastery where her body and the body of the emperor were interred, the Monastery of the Two Lings. This image of corulership is evoked in the image of the Two-Buddha scene in the Huangfu Gong grotto, which is located directly above the image of her, Xiaoming, and both of their entourages.

In terms of more concrete patterns of rulership, we must pay attention to the connection between the statecraft of Empress Dowager Ling and Empress Wu/Emperor Wu Zhao. As empress, Wu completed the *feng* and *shan* imperial sacrifices alongside Emperor Gaozong, and she did so in an interpretation that stressed the female role.¹⁴ Similarly, in chapter 2, we saw how Empress Dowager Ling commanded her courtier, Cui Guang, to scour the classical canons of ritual to find a way to be able to enact the ancient rites alongside the emperor. Cui Guang found such precedent in the reign of Han Empress Hexi, and the empress dowager went on to perform rites of imperial legitimation with Emperor Xiaoming. Furthermore, both Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu Zhao employed female politicians at their courts,¹⁵ and we have dated evidence for these female politicians through their entombed biographies.¹⁶ Both these women knew Luoyang as their capitals while Luoyang had also been the capital of the Eastern Han, and both rulers made use of Eastern Han ruling structures in their cities while they also both built infrastructure that connected their city to the Han city. Both their flagship structures of state administration in Luoyang were burned to the ground shortly after their completion. In sum, both of these ruling women relied on Han dynastic symbols and structures to help legitimate their contested reigns even though those very structures did not leave ideological space for the accession of women to seats of direct power.

To augment the lack of support for women rulers in the Han traditions they both inherited and innovated, they also utilized then-popular Buddhist modalities of rulership. They both built central stūpas with prefectural stūpa connections in order to establish themselves as Buddhist rulers. In Emperor Wu Zhao's case, these pagodas were all named after the *Great Cloud Sūtra* and hence invoked its prophecy of a female cakravartin;¹⁷ however, in Empress Dowager Ling's case, these prefectural pagodas were built in imitation of her great Eternal Peace Monastery with its soaring pagoda. In both cases, therefore, the female regents had pagodas built that directly related to their own leadership as Buddhist rulers. Similarly, both regents worked closely with members of the monastic elite in order to facilitate their projects of imperial Buddhism. For Emperor Wu Zhao, one of her closest monastic servants was a monk named Fazang (643–712), who, sources say, lectured the emperor on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, translated sūtras, dispelled invaders through the use of esoteric Buddhist rituals, and facilitated the emperor's personal veneration of the relic at the Dharma Gate Monastery (Famen si) in Luoyang.¹⁸ Another thing that Fazang did was to compose the biography of a monk named Lingbian (d.u.),¹⁹ who Fazang says worked in the service of Empress Dowager Ling. In analyzing this biography, however, Zhang Wenliang has argued that Fazang largely fabricated the biography and did so to promote the evolving Huayan tradition in his time.²⁰ There is no record of Lingbian in either the *Book of the Wei* or the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. That it was important for Fazang to link his own Buddhist tradition to that of Empress Dowager

Ling—even if it was a false or imagined connection—speaks to his desire, from the perspective of the Tang, to commemorate and publicize the Northern Wei's program of courtly Buddhism. In other words, even if Fazang's biography of Lingbian is fiction, the very fact that he wrote it suggests that the power of Empress Dowager Ling's Buddhist court was present in the cultural memory of the Tang and Emperor Wu Zhao's immediate monastic servants.

In his study of the textual precedents that helped Emperor Wu Zhao secure and legitimate her own rule, Antonino Forte is careful to show that the *Great Cloud Sūtra* was in circulation prior to the reign of the female emperor and that it was only the commentary to the text that was written to specifically legitimate her reign. Forte undertakes this analysis in order to counter what later histories of the Tang would have us believe—namely, that Empress Wu actually authored the *Great Cloud Sūtra*.²¹ Forte's study is of tremendous importance for the field of Tang studies; however, in his time, he would not have known of Northern Wei courtier Yuan Rong's colophons. In chapter 4 we saw that Yuan Rong twice commissioned the copying of the *Great Cloud Sūtra* in the violent times after the death of the empress dowager and did so to publicly show his support of the various emperors backed by competing militarized factions at the end of the dynasty. Importantly, he commissioned the text alongside other well-known Northern Wei Buddhist texts, and therefore placed the *Great Cloud Sūtra* in the context of a collection of then-popular Buddhist texts. If we consider the *Great Cloud Sūtra* in the further context of the other texts, such as the *Sūtra on the Woman*, “*Silver Countenance*” and the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, which we know were patronized by Empress Dowager Ling, we begin to see how Buddhist texts about political women and women as rulers and cakravartins were well known in the Northern Wei. These, I believe, are part of the legacy of the dynasty that resurfaced in the Tang under the reign of Emperor Wu Zhao. Just like in the *Sūtra of the Woman* “*Silver Countenance*,” where Silver Countenance has reached transformative religious attainment in her female body prior to being made a cakravartin, the queen in the *Great Cloud Sūtra* has not yet changed her sex, though she is prophesized to do so. Just like Silver Countenance, the queen in the *Great Cloud Sūtra* has reached full spiritual attainment in her female body. That spiritual attainment allows her to rule as a Buddhist ruler who will, in her next life, electively change her sex as a final act on the path to buddhahood. Both texts were known in the Northern Wei and promoted the political prominence of Buddhist women. As a mini corpus, they existed in the reigns of both Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu Zhao. The support that both these women gave to such textual production and proliferation in their time created a certain continuity between them, with the Northern Wei providing the backdrop for the Tang.

In his study of the diverse cultural and religious sources that Emperor Wu Zhao employed to secure her rule, N. Harry Rothschild argues that this woman who ruled had a lesser-known predecessor: Queen Seondeok (r. 632–47), the first

woman ruler of the Kingdom of Silla in Korea. Postulating that Queen Seondeok was the prototype for Emperor Wu Zhao, Rothschild points out that she may have been seen as a descendent of the Śākya clan of the Buddha and therefore was vested in Buddhist foundational mythology in the same way as Emperor Wu Zhao was. In support of this argument, Rothschild cites an account from the Buddhist chronicle of Three Kingdoms Korea, the *Omitted Events of the Three Kingdoms Period* (Samguk Yusa), where, in his translation, the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī appeared to a Sillan pilgrim at Mount Wutai (Wutai shan) and told him, “As your nation’s sovereign is a member of India’s Kshatriya class, she already received a prophecy from the Buddha.”²² Such a statement signals a prophecy of future Buddhahood like that seen above in the *Sūtra of Kṣemavati* and suggests the common association between elite women, buddhahood, and rule that was en vogue between the fifth and seventh centuries of the Common Era. Although we know less about Queen Seondeok than we do about her Chinese counterparts, it seems plausible that she also may have been a prototype for Emperor Wu Zhao. The latter certainly knew of the former, who had sent many emissaries to the Tang.²³

What Rothschild does not consider, however, is that Queen Seondeok herself had a likely prototype: Empress Dowager Ling. In his study of the development of the Buddhist tradition in Silla, Richard McBride reveals several ways that Buddhism in Silla was intimately connected to Northern Wei Buddhism; notably, the shared Buddhist practice of Empress Dowager Ling and Queen Seondeok is foundational in this history. Empress Dowager Ling’s signature project across the Buddhist landscape of the resplendent city of Luoyang was the Eternal Peace Monastery with its soaring, golden, nine-storied pagoda. This pagoda was so resplendent and so famed across the Buddhist world that it was rebuilt in Silla in the compounds of the August Dragon Monastery, which functioned as the state’s signature Buddhist monastery in the same way the Eternal Peace Monastery did. Although, as we have seen, the project of rebuilding the pagoda was initiated by Silla King Chinhŭng, it was completed under Queen Seondeok. Furthermore, both Richard McBride and Sem Vermeersch have discussed the adoption of the Northern Wei’s court-governed ecclesiastical administration in Silla, as well as Silla’s employment of monastic superintendents and managers across its polity as court/monastic go-betweens and police.²⁴ As we have seen, this system came to its maturity under Empress Dowager Ling, though it has earlier roots in the Pingcheng era of the Northern Wei.

With Queen Seondeok as the intermediary between Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu Zhao, what we see is the development of the strong connection between Buddhism and women regents that is first seen in the Northern Wei but that became popular across East Asia from the fifth to seventh centuries. This connection is made only stronger when we look to Japan’s Yamato period, known for its own women regents with connections to Buddhism. Although difficult to pin down historically, Empress Suiko (r. 592–628)²⁵ is remembered as having been the first in a successive line of women rulers, just as she worked diligently

to support Buddhism in her realm. Empress Suiko was known to lecture on Buddhist texts, and she legally recognized Buddhism as an official religion in Yamato. Furthermore, and rather famously, Empress Suiko's courtier, the semi-mythical Prince Shōtoku (574–622) is said to have written a commentary on the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* while serving at her court.²⁶ As we have seen, the earliest epigraphical attestation to the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*—a text that ties together women, Buddhism, and statecraft—is found in the entombed biography of Empress Dowager Ling's aunt, the nun Sengzhi. According to the entombed biography, Sengzhi was famed for chanting the text and was brought to the Northern Wei court on account of that fame. Although Suiko provides a compelling comparison with Empress Dowager Ling, a second Buddhist woman who ruled Japan makes for an even more compelling one, and one for which historians have more certain sources. That woman was known as Empress Kōken in her first reign (749–58) and Empress Shōtoku in her second (764–70). Like Empress Dowager Ling, Empress Kōken/Shōtoku was a ruler deeply invested in Buddhist activities whose reigns were interrupted by coup d'état. Indicating an even more fundamental similarity, the two rulers are also said to have had licentious sexual relationships, to have been inappropriately close to destabilizing Buddhist monks, and to have patronized propitiatory Buddhist magic. They were both inheritors of a family tradition of Buddhist patronage and they both personally promoted the production of Buddhist texts.²⁷

PROPOSING A FEMINIST PERIODIZATION

Even though we have no direct, single source from the empress dowager's time wherein she explicitly states that she has positioned herself as a cakravartin ruler and her granddaughter as a bodhisattva emperor, when we look across East Asia to the ruling Buddhist women that came after the empress dowager, we see how comparable structures in the rules of other women across East Asia have allowed them to do similar things. Taken together, Empress Dowager Ling, Empresses Suiko and Kōken/Shōtoku, Queen Seondeok, and Emperor Wu Zhao belong to a historical era in which women who were Buddhist and who had some connection with religious and gender-based forms of culture from north Asia, largely via the Northern Wei, had success as politicians. This is particularly interesting given that this time period also coincides with the wide adoption and adaptation of Sinitic imperial structures rooted in the Han dynasty across the region. These structures never made space for women to rule; however, when the structures themselves began to adapt to the strong presence of Buddhists, their ideas, and their institutions, they became a form of imperial Buddhism that seems to have made space for women, especially when those women were already accustomed to living the sorts of public and even martial lives that the women of the Taghbach cultural milieu lived. Herman Ooms has discussed this rare collection of East Asian female rulers in the seventh century, but he does not discuss their Buddhist patronage, which I believe is integral to their

stories.²⁸ As powerful rulers in their empires, these female regents helped to facilitate the adoption and adaptation of the Sinitic imperial system, including legal and penal codes, imperial rituals, and the adoption of Literary Sinitic as an official language with its associated names and ranks, yet they did so as nominally Buddhist women. Looked at somewhat differently, we can say that all their realms—Northern Wei and Tang China, Yamato/Nara Japan, and Silla Korea—adopted a form of imperial Buddhism that was both open to and encouraged by women in positions of power and that I believe was connected to the type of imperial Buddhism that we see under the Northern Wei where women with public lives were able to capitalize on the growth of Buddhism in the region in unique ways that were indebted to the cultural heritage of the Inner Asian peoples and polities that settled in East Asia during this period. This imperial Buddhism is noted for its strong patronage of the Buddha as a religious-political figurehead, but it is also known for its use of traditionally Han-Chinese modes and strategies of rule, the Sinitic calendar, and a form of Literary Chinese that we should refer to here as Literary Sinitic because of its use outside China proper. Finally, this form of Buddhism at court appears to have been a conflux of ideas and practices in which women were able to climb to high positions as politicians. Their ability to do so was affected both by a Buddhist institution that made space for women of rank and by Buddhist ideas about women as religious practitioners and political powerbrokers.

When we look backward from Empress Kōken/Shōtoku to Emperor Wu Zhao to Queen Seondeok to Empress Suiko to Empress Dowager Ling, we see a historical era in which women patrons of Buddhism became supreme rulers of their polities. Although the Northern Wei is the earliest attested instantiation of Buddhist rulers who were women with connections to Inner Asian and steppe cultures, the era in which these women came into their own cannot be adequately characterized as a neat historical line from the Northern Wei to the other relevant places in medieval East Asia. A better way to think about this would be to say that the early medieval era was a time involving the reinvention of tradition along many vectors whereby women and their societies inherited a complex and intersecting web of methods and models for enacting gender, politics, and religion. We see clearly in the Northern Wei how this allowed for the rise of Empress Dowager Ling. Even though she may have been somebody that other women across East Asia had known about it, these same women were tasked with reinventing their own traditions through the sources available to them and in the times in which they lived.

With a final statement on these sources available for the reinvention of tradition in the medieval period, I make my last argument: Historians of East Asia would be well served by engaging with new, and feminist, modalities of periodization that characterize points of cultural change in the lives of historical persons who traditionally have not controlled the writing of historical and historiographical documents—in this case, women. Normative periodization of China's medieval period adopts imperial narratives that are androcentric and ethnocentric. Therefore, the period

of the Southern and Northern Dynasties is often characterized as one of “division” and “brokenness.” This indicates a China that was lost between the famous empires of the Han and the Tang. A sort of dark age, the period we call the “early medieval” in Chinese periodization unavoidably calls to mind social unrest and the lack of centralized power. In his overview of the period, Mark Edward Lewis points out that this period has been relegated to a secondary status in Chinese historiographical materials, which “prefer to focus on times of unity and political power.”²⁹ In that same overview, Lewis leads his reader away from the idea of the second-class status of this era by showing how the internationalism, multiculturalism, and migration that characterized the period contributed to the rebuilding of historically prominent traditions of art, culture, religion, military, and politics that would continue to develop in the area of the world that we now call China.

In thinking with Lewis on this topic, I want to bring the question of women into our understanding of this era and suggest that a feminist periodization would find, in the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, a high point for the development of diversified social roles for women. This was a period involving the disintegration of classical modes of authority, including the basic modality of social authority enforced in the patriarchal family and governmental structure. With new ways of enacting gendered authority for women that arrived in the central plains with both Buddhism and the influence of Inner Asian gender paradigms from the migratory peoples of the steppe, women suddenly found themselves with tremendous and innovative social opportunities that were inherently hybrid and creative, given the lack of centralized and classical structures of social authority. We have seen how this all came together in the Northern Wei in the mid-sixth century in order for one woman and her court to change the course of history in her time. Based on this study, I would like to argue that adopting a wider feminist periodization that sees this era as a unique period in the social history of women would allow further case studies to be revealed and also to ask the historically pressing question of what happened to women’s social and political autonomy *after* the mid-Tang when government again became centralized and dominant social structures like the court and the Buddhist institution became recodified in ways that were androcentric, and, I would argue, patriarchal.

ON THE FAILURE OF GREAT MEN AND THEIR HISTORIES

I close this book with the same question I started it with: Why is Empress Dowager Ling not better known? Here, though, I flip the question: Why has it taken so much effort for us to know something about her? This book has been filled with an occasionally overwhelming amount of historical detail that I have brought together in order to tell the story of one woman and her world. I have done this research and written this book because I believe that it tells an historically important story that

has not been told: the story of the rise of Buddhist women as regents in East Asia's medieval period. Why does no single historical source tell this story in the same way that they so easily tell us about men who ruled? An instructive counterexample here is Emperor Wu of the Liang whom we first met in chapter 1. Although Emperor Wu lived and ruled at the same time as Empress Dowager Ling did, his practices of Buddhist kingship have been well described in the very same historical sources that have remained relatively silent on the topic of Empress Dowager Ling.

The Ru scholars who wrote the official histories in medieval China were serious historians who were tasked with the complicated job of compiling and composing histories that they considered to have veracity but also documented political continuity. In my opinion, these great men failed in some areas. In constructing their own texts through a methodology that prioritized "great men," these medieval scholars failed to create narratives that in any meaningful way described the contributions that women and cultural outsiders made to the development of political institutions in their time. Such a failure has important consequences for the ways in which they also chronicled and characterized other great men in their times. For instance, how much more interesting is it to think about Emperor Wu of the Liang as a ruler whose practice of Buddhist kingship was in conversation and, at the same time, likely competition with the Buddhist ruler to the north of him, Empress Dowager Ling? If we leave her out of the story, his own story becomes less accurate, less meaningful. Even larger than that, if we leave Empress Dowager Ling out of the story of Buddhist kingship in East Asia, then the whole story of the Southern and Northern Dynasties itself loses veracity: The similarities between these two rulers are suggestive of a shared cultural, political, and religious nexus north and south that was not limited by human borders and the military defense of them.

Ru scholars who wrote the histories of medieval dynasties adopted the schema of heaven's ordering and the emperor's arbitration of it as the foundational source of imperial legitimation and continuity in their writing about the past. They wrote their histories within an ideological framework of political order that is andro- and ethnocentric, bureaucratic, and concerned with documenting kingship and kinship. They did so even while they themselves lived within complex social systems that challenged the very ideas that framed their own writing. Empress Dowager Ling is fascinating because she is one such challenge, and it is clear to me that the Ru scholars who wrote about her were largely unequipped to do so within the tradition of dynastic continuity and imperial legitimation that they were familiar with. In writing the life of the empress dowager across the medieval period, such scholars characterized her as a "hen who announced the dawn" and who therefore brought chaos to the world instead of order. They troped her as a licentious usurper and showed little attempt to understand the social worlds in which she lived as a woman from the edges of the empire who came to a central position of power because her family's connections to the Buddhist tradition and because of the opportunities afforded to women within Taghbach gender organization—another

topic that the Ru were ill-equipped to document. Instead of engaging with her story in its multivalent historical reality, historiographers who wrote about the empress dowager reiterated the idea that “all under heaven detested her” and that “all under heaven were aghast” at the methods that she used to hold on to power. These same men also compared her to Han Emperor Ling, whose name she shares, thereby associating her with supernatural sources that were fundamentally outside heaven’s ordering and therefore prone to chaos and collapse.

I believe that the empress dowager conceived of herself differently. As a ruler who invested herself in symbols and modalities of imperial legitimation from the then classical Han empire, she would have been familiar with the idea of the ruler as arbiter of heaven’s mandate. She would have also been aware of the fact that, as a woman who ruled directly over a dynasty founded by ethnic Others from the Han whose political philosophy she was articulating, and as a public Buddhist serving an institution that we might call Confucian, she was ill fit for the job of emperor as it was conventionally understood in her time. She appears to have taken seriously her role as ruler of all “under heaven” just as she reinvented it. Utilizing the Eastern Han’s imperial observatory, or numinous platform, she also renovated the space by making it into her own, personally endowed, Buddhist mortuary temple for her deceased father. In so doing, she not only paid homage to her classical inheritance but she also showed herself as an innovator in her time who capitalized on diverse social structures that allowed her to play an integral role in the reinvention of kingship in this period.

The empress dowager cultivated an identity of supernatural efficacy rooted in Buddhism as a part of her strategy of rulership and also, perhaps, because she herself practiced Buddhism. She did so in the cultural context of the non-Han northern dynasties that made space for women to take leadership roles in society. In so doing, the men who criticized her used her invocation of supernatural efficacy, or *ling*, against her and connected her with the much-maligned Han ruler whose name she shares. I would suggest, on the other hand, that the empress dowager’s efficacy as a supernatural ruler connected with the Buddhist tradition far outlasted her rule and far outlived the lives of those who failed to write about her in an accurate way. Empress Dowager Ling was a woman at the vanguard of the emergence of Buddhist kingship in the medieval period. Although she was not ultimately successful in her bid to rule her polity independently as a Buddhist monarch with longevity, she nonetheless provided a model for later women who were. That we do not find her story in normative historical and historiographical sources is not her failure; rather, it is the failure of the men who wrote about her and who employed a strategy of “great men” history in their own writing. In writing this present book, I hope not to have merely shown that great women like the empress dowager simply existed; instead, I hope to have argued that we can only tell meaningful and accurate historical stories about them by seeking to overturn the very methodologies that wrote them out of history in the first place.